

# DISASTER PREPAREDNESS *for* PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



In recent years, California has experienced a number of natural disasters including earthquakes, floods, and fires. Concurrently, the population is increasing yearly, resulting in a greater number of people who will have to contend with events of this type.

Additionally, the number of people with disabilities has increased significantly in the past two decades due to such factors as an aging population, advances in medical technology and treatment, and a higher survival rate among disabled infants.

It is important for people with disabilities to know what to do to prepare to take care of themselves in an emergency situation. In many instances, the demands on rescue personnel may be such that it may be hours or even days before they can reach everyone who might need assistance, including people with disabilities. This would depend on the size of the event, and the area it affects. For example, a strong earthquake in a large urban area like Los Angeles could involve many thousands of people and make the streets and access routes impassable, a situation which could last, in some areas, for several days. People with disabilities must be prepared, and they can be, by following the simple steps outlined in this publication.

The California Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities is affiliated with the National Association of Governors' Committees on People With Disabilities and Community/Mayors' Committees throughout California.

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# **EMERGENCY PLANNING**

- **Establish a "Buddy" System**

Identify people who are nearby and can assist you in the event of an emergency. It is good to have more than one "buddy", particularly in different areas where you spend most of your time, such as in the work place, at home, or school. The more people who know where you might be, and are alerted to come look for you, the better. You may wish to give your "buddies" lists of crucial information, such as the location of medications, special equipment or batteries to operate it.

- **Assess Your Surroundings**

Look around your home or work place and identify accessible exits. Determine whether you have an adequate alarm system. If you have a hearing impairment, it should include visual warnings. Consider your transportation options. You should identify as many options as possible, in case some are not usable. How would you evacuate if there were a fire or flood? Is there public transit available? Neighbors you could call on? What preparations can you make now?

Look for possible obstructions, e.g., a bookshelf that might fall over and block your path or furniture that is not fastened down and could topple. Eliminate hazards such as these and others, such as mirrors or hanging plants. Items that can fall and injure you should be fastened to the wall or made as secure as possible. Water heaters should be attached to the studs in the wall with metal heater straps which are available in most hardware stores. These, and water closets, can be a good source of emergency water.

Identify the turn-off controls for utilities such as gas, electricity and water. For example, an earthquake which ruptures a gas line could result in a possible explosion. Once you locate the controls, determine how to use them. Can extended handles on turn-off valves make them more usable for you? Again, make sure that your "buddies" have information as to where the controls are located.

- **Review Emergency Supplies**

You should have a one week supply of canned or dried foods, medication and water. Try to arrange for at least one week's worth of any prescriptions, in case you cannot get to a drug store immediately. When leaving home (even for work or school) carry a week's worth of medications. You should have a first aid kit, flashlights, and batteries for any special equipment you use. If you require life sustaining equipment such as a respirator, it would be worth the purchase of a small generator. Check with the vendor to make sure it is compatible with your equipment. Small ancillary devices such as hearing aids should also be provided extra batteries nearby. If you are able to procure a cellular phone, it may prove invaluable if phone service is out. Battery powered radios or TVs are important, especially to the hearing impaired, to get emergency information.

- **Make Your Supplies Accessible**

A cloth bag tied to a bedpost or something nearby can keep medication, medical equipment, visual aids, and other items available in a sudden disaster like an earthquake. Devices like canes and harnesses for service animals are

also important. Obviously, clothing must also be kept near the bed for emergency use and, most importantly, sturdy shoes. The greatest number of injuries during earthquakes are foot lacerations due to broken glass on the floor. This is particularly crucial at night when the power is out and it is necessary to move about in the dark. If you use a wheelchair, have extra parts like tires and inner tubes available.

## **PLANNING COOPERATIVELY**

Working with others can often be helpful in making sure emergency supplies and assistance will be available when needed. For example, people with severe disabilities who need equipment, such as back-up generators for respirators, may wish to contact local service clubs that can sometimes provide assistance. Also, groups of persons with disabilities might band together to arrange for equipment of this type to be identified and stored for loan in local areas. Durable medical equipment firms might be contacted to arrange for equipment to be available on loan. Local fire departments also will sometimes agree to store emergency equipment, e.g., generators. Another approach to providing for emergency assistance may be to contact in-home nursing organizations and arrange for them to follow up with people who may be isolated in their homes and cannot request help if there is a power failure.

## **DURING A DISASTER**

- **Earthquake**

If you are in bed, stay there until the shaking stops. If not in bed try to duck under something sturdy. At least cover your head and hold on until the shaking stops. Move away from windows and under a doorway if possible. If a wheelchair user, lock your wheels. Protect your head with a pillow, blanket, or other covering. Do not run outside as falling debris may be hazardous.

- **Flood**

Use your battery-powered radio to monitor emergency bulletins regarding evacuation. Use a flashlight, flare, or whistle to signal if necessary. A "help" sign in the window can be helpful also. Do not touch electric lines or equipment until you are sure they are safe. Plastic bags are useful to store equipment, medications, clothing, etc., to keep them dry. They can also be used to line toilets if no water is available. And plastic sheeting, of the type used for landscaping, can be useful to keep out water around walls and doorways.

- **Fire**

Do not open doors without feeling for heat on the other side. If the door is hot when you feel it, go out through the window or take another route. If you have no way out, keep your door closed so that smoke cannot get into the room. Open a window and signal for attention if possible. In smoky environments, crouch on the floor and crawl to a clear exit as smoke and heat tend to rise.

Once out of your building, **do not** return for any reason. Call the fire department from a location that is a safe distance from the fire.

If your clothes catch fire, stop where you are, drop to the floor and roll around. That will help put out the flames. Fire experts call this action **stop, drop and roll**.

## **AFTER A DISASTER**

- **Stay Put**

In most instances, if you are not required to evacuate, stay where you are if you can. Very often the streets are more hazardous than your immediate surroundings. Also, if you stay put, people know where to look for you. This is particularly true during an earthquake. Do not assume immediate rescue. In a major disaster, there are often many injuries and many people become disabled. There are often limited personnel available to evacuate them. It may be hours, or in some situations even days, before you can receive assistance.

- **Assess the Situation**

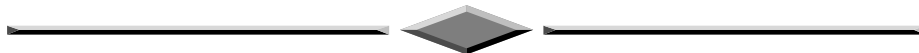
Check for injuries and take necessary first aid measures. Make sure your utilities are off unless it is safe to use them. Also, make sure appliances are off. Use your battery-powered radio to attempt to get current information on the extent of the disaster and things you should do.

- **Communication**

Try to get help by phone if possible. Restrict your calls to emergency only, as many people will be attempting to make emergency calls. Use a whistle or flashlight to signal. If you are hearing impaired, you should have stored paper and writing materials to make window signs requesting help and communicate with emergency personnel.

Natural disasters cannot be predicted nor controlled. Your chance of survival, particularly as a disabled person, depends on the extent of your planning before the disaster. So review your situation, including methods of egress, emergency supplies, etc. Make sure that you have what you need in a place where it is easily accessible and that you have made contact with friends who can come and assist you if necessary. During a widespread emergency, fully accessible shelters may not be available. There may be problems with accessible toilet facilities and in some cases nonacceptance of service animals. You may need to plan for alternate living arrangements after a disaster. We can never know when an emergency will happen, but we do know that there will be more of them and that we can prepare.

For further information regarding resources for emergency planning you may contact the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities at (916) 654-8055 (Voice) or (916) 654-9820 (TTY). You may also write us at the address on this brochure.



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